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RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANJUL 000354

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/05/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM AU GA

SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: CONVERSATION WITH HUMAN RIGHTS NGO DIRECTOR

REF: BANJUL 348 AND PREVIOUS (NOTAL)

Classified By: POLOFF ELIZABETH SCHWEFLER, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

¶1. (SBU) Poloff met on June 1 with the Executive Director of the African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (ACDHRS), Hannah Forster (protect), to discuss her observations and her NGO's activities regarding the current human rights environment in The Gambia. Ms. Forster had recently addressed the 39th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human & People's Rights, attended by the Ambassador. She was the only speaker at the Session to publicly mention the need for the Gambian government to respect the rule of law and the rights of detainees held in connection with the failed coup plot in March (reftel).

¶2. (C) When asked her opinion of the human rights situation in The Gambia, Ms. Forster summed it up with one word, "grim." She reports that ACDHRS has taken on an increasingly active role as an advocate for the families of those in detention, making calls on their behalf and working to deliver food and clothing. While her official requests for access have been refused, she has used contacts at the prison to pass information and supplies for the families. She also stated that she has used her contacts with the NGO community in Dakar to help those who fear arrest or persecution to get to Senegal and receive aid and support once they are there. She stated that she is not afraid of the Gambian government, but that she is trying to keep a low profile and work behind the scenes. There have been no government reprisals against ACDHRS, but she believes that her phone is tapped and is suspicious that some counterintelligence operatives may have approached her under the guise of wanting to flee the country in order to learn more about her operation. She continues to have access to high levels of the Gambian government, including the Interior Minister and the Attorney General, but reports that they will not answer her direct questions and that the Interior Minister has warned her to "be careful."

¶3. (C) Ms. Forster does not expect the African Union Commission on Human & People's Rights to issue any reports that are critical of the Gambian government. She pointed out that the Commission has yet to critically report on human rights violations in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia or Sudan and expressed frustration that it is a "highly political organization that has not been an effective advocate on human rights." She plans to speak at the Gender Forum and CSO Forum at the upcoming AU Summit here, and she doubts that there will be any criticism coming from the AU towards The Gambia.

¶4. (SBU) Ms. Forster plans to increase ACDHRS focus on programs that will raise the Gambian population's extremely low awareness of their legal rights. An example of this was a poster in the ACDHRS lobby entitled "What is Bail?" with simple illustrations explaining the legal process of posting

bail in a way that the general population can understand.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: ACDHRS is a well-established NGO with solid international funding, which gives Ms. Forster some freedom and security to take an increasingly activist role on behalf of detainees and those who fear arrest. We fully share her characterization of the human rights situation here as "grim." We will be exploring possible funding opportunities to work with ACDHRS on increasing human rights awareness in The Gambia. END COMMENT.

¶6. (U) Septel follows on status of detainees and other human rights issues.

STAFFORD